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Week of
April 7, 1941

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of April 7, 1941*
† "Watch on the Rhine" opened Tuesday, April 1st, at the Martin Beck Theatre.
† "Your Loving Son" opened Friday, April 4th, at the Little Theatre.
† Revised edition of "It Happens on Ice" opened Friday, April 4th, at the Center Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN	NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK POST	NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE	NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"	NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

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"Your Loving Son"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, *April 5, 1941*

Loving Son at Little Theatre

By JOHN ANDERSON

THOUGH it took three producers to present "Your Loving Son" on the stage of the Little Theatre last night, it seemed that a fraction of a producer should have been able to tell with only half an eye that the play wasn't worth doing at all.

For Abby Merchant has written a determinedly skittish but insistently dull little item about the marital mix-ups of a couple of New York families of the East River duplex and duplicity set, and she has driven her points home with the graceful adroitness of a Mack truck.

Her main point is that parents playing around on the edge of the divorce courts ought to consider the rights and feelings of their children, and while this is undeniably a good argument, I think it would be great if they considered at the Little, at least, the rights and feelings of the audience.

Moral Intentions

As it stands (and none too steadily) the play goes through the motions of the old fashioned Palais Royale sex farce, but with highly moral intentions. People rush in and out, phones ring, the maid quits in a careful Manhattan helter-skelter while Dorcas Winslow tries to carry on an affair with a painter she met on Nantucket.

She seems to fall for painters and when their ardours become too compromising she lets them paint her portrait. She has a closetful of portraits.

Papa Winslow rebels against this peculiar art activity and solaces himself with a lady two floors above whose husband happily doesn't understand her. Junior Winslow comes home from camp, sees his home on the verge of ruin, and like a combination of Boy Scout and little Mr. Fixit, tries to straighten things out.

He and his little girl friend upstairs conclude that their parents must be adolescent too and then a motor accident reveals the fact (which seemed by then a secret only to the author) that Junior's papa and Rosamond's mother were also carrying on with one another.

No one remarked that it is a small world after all, but one character did say at 11 minutes past 10 o'clock that "This thing has gone far enough," thereby proving himself both a critic and an optimist—a hitherto untried combination.

In any case Miss Merchant goes on poking at her plot as if trying valiantly to get the clinkers out, until the clock turns 11. Then both couples decide they have been very foolish; Mrs. Winslow turns the painter out and settles down to be a good wife and mother.

Young Nuisance

Though I thought that any group of intelligent adults would have turned on Junior and smacked him down, Miss Merchant presumably thinks that he is a noble, resourceful and entertaining youth. But it takes all, and I'm afraid slightly more, than even Master Frankie Thomas can do to create an ingratiating lad out of a stage nuisance. It is simply an impossible assignment for which he should not be held responsible.

Charita Bauer, as the other youngster, suggests a sweet sincerity that gives some charm to a pallid part, and the grown-ups fare even worse.

As the chief couple involved, Jessie Royce Landis and Jay Fassett have proved by admirable performances that they should not be pestered by such plays.

And neither, for that matter, should anyone.

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *April 5, 1941*

'Your Loving Son' a Bit Juvenile

"Your Loving Son," comedy by Abby Merchant directed by Arthur Sircom, at the Little Theatre. Presented by J. Richard Kennedy, Alfred Bloomingdale and Joseph Loewi, April 4, 1941.

★ ★

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

ONE trouble with "Your Loving Son," which arrived last night, is that the children in it are so much smarter than their elders. And there's something about a smart stage child which always give you an insane desire to climb up over the footlights and hit it once on the head.

Thus Frankie Thomas, who's a nice youngster and a good young actor, appears particularly poisonous in the new Abby Merchant comedy. Ditto Charita Bauer, who was just a little tyke a few stage seasons ago and now is one of the theatre's prettiest and most promising adolescents. Both of these youngsters have so much more sense than their fatheaded stage relatives and associates that it must make even them uncomfortable.

Frankie and Charita live in the same apartment building and they have a pretty tough time with their parents, who are at the dangerous age. Frankie's mama keeps getting half-nelsons on young artists, Charita's papa is always away from home. So of course Frankie's papa and Charita's mama find each other.

The parents flit in and out of town and each other's apartments until finally Jay Fassett, who's Frankie's problem, and Ruth Lee, who's Charita's, get themselves mixed up in an auto crash before they could get themselves mixed up in anything else. And only the adroit maneuvering of the children staves off wholesale divorce and a baker's dozen new and mistaken marriages and reshuffling.

Good actors are involved in this. Jessie Royce Landis as a silly wife and sillier mother. Jay Fassett as her emptyheaded husband. Eddie Nugent as a bewildered young artist and Ruth Lee as another frustrated wife. Also Kate Warriner as somebody's sister.

There is a funny light comedy scene between Nugent and young Thomas and there are a few good hokey gags spotted in places which need them most. When they're just being kids, Thomas and Miss Bauer are often appealing and attractive. But the whole thing is staged as if nobody, including the producers, really believed in it and for that you really can't blame them.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK TIMES
April 5, 1941

'Your Loving Son' Opens at the Little

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IF THERE is anything worse than sitting through a silly play, it must be the job of acting in one. All this department had to do at the Little Theatre last evening was to sit still between the hours of 9 and 11 with two delightful intermissions for quarreling on the sidewalk. But Jessie Royce Landis, Frankie Thomas, Jay Fassett, Kate Warriner and several other actors had to pretend that they thought Abby Merchant's "Your Loving Son" was worth scurrying around the stage for and worth all the little gestures of surprise, anxiety, coyness, brightness and intrigue that actors dutifully put into fiddle-faddle in the theatre.

"Your Loving Son" is the sort of play in which the men refer to "my club" as though it were a threat. When male characters in a play start leaving their wives, there is something so solid about the sound of "my club." The clubs of New York must be jammed to the doors. Rows of indignant gentlemen must be sleeping on cots in the lobbies.

As a matter of fact, "Your Loving Son" is a farce written in honor of the home. It shows how an adolescent boy shames his philandering parents into settling down like members of a respectable family again. Whether or not that is actually worth while is highly improbable in this instance. Families like this one ought to be broken up regularly every Saturday night. They are a menace to home defense.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
April 6, 1941

Your Loving Son Is Not Amusing

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

YOUR LOVING SON is one of those bits of noise and nonsense we must expect on Broadway now that April's here. There's no use going at it critically: it was meant to be amusing, and it isn't. It goes its prancing and coltish way piling up yawns instead of laughs, and around 11 o'clock decides there is no sense being stubborn any longer.

The idea behind it—some thirty years behind it—is that of the adolescent son who, seeing his parents' marriage about to go on the rocks because each of them is seeking outside companionship, decides to play Master Fixit. When mother is entertaining an artist who wants to make love to her, Junior thwarts him by dashing frantically in and out of the living room. When father wants to take a lady out in the moonlight, Junior keeps her in the parlor by making her sew buttons on his shirts.

When these simple devices don't put an end to the romances, Junior and his girl take time off from algebra and pretend they have eloped. This dazzling ruse has the desired effect. In fact, it not only brings Junior's parents to their senses, but it also enables the curtain to come down. The cast was—well, gallant.

"Your Loving Son"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *April 5, 1941*

'Your Loving Son,' Laborious Comedy, Is Offered at the Little Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

ACTORS were vivacious last evening at the Little Theater, twinkling through a rather dense fog of comedy-drama thrown up by Abby Merchant. Miss Jessie Royce Landis was debonair, Frankie Thomas was boyishly exuberant and Jay Fassett was hearty in the comical vein. But while others skipped, the playwright plodded and not all the wiles of actors can offset a plodding playwright.

Miss Merchant calls her play "Your Loving Son." She writes about a bright adolescent who goes to a great deal of trouble to keep his parents in line. His mother has a penchant for artists and loves to philander. His father talks about himself to the lady upstairs. The daughter of the lady upstairs and the boy worry together about this and involve everybody in complications which would seem farcical if they were only funnier. An automobile accident and a pretended elopement provide those scenes of action without which no comedy is complete and finally all ends as well as may be expected in the family lives of such dull people.

It would be polite to pretend that it is hard to say what is the matter with "Your Loving Son." It would be possible to argue that the plot is no more preposterous than the pots of quite funny farces of the past. The characters are certainly not notably original, but old standbys have been comical before now. At this point the polite reviewer scratches his head and gives it up, merely reporting that for obscure reasons the various ingredients fail to jell.

But the reason for the dullness of "Your Loving Son" is not, if we may abandon politeness, really at all obscure. The reason that "Your Loving Son" is plodding and not funny, in spite of the efforts of the cast, is simply that Miss Merchant doesn't write well. Her efforts at wit are unskillful. Her dialogue is flat. Her contrivances are at once intricate and hackneyed. "Your Loving Son" is apprentice work.

All the actors deserve better. Miss Landis may try rather hard, but superhuman efforts are required. Young Mr. Thomas may bound a bit, but extra vigor is necessary in a tired play. Eddie Nugent is slightly detached as the artist, but detachment is surely understandable. Charita Bauer is lightly amusing and Mr. Fassett misses no tricks. What handicaps him, and the others, is that the author has missed so many.

'YOUR LOVING SON'

A comedy in three acts, by Abby Merchant; directed by Arthur Sircom; Setting by Raymond Sovey; presented at the Little Theater on April 4, 1941, by Jay Richard Kennedy in association with Alfred Bloomingdale and Joseph F. Loewi. The cast:

Lulu ..... Rachel Sewall
Dorcas Winslow .... Jessie Royce Landis
Joshua Winslow ..... Jay Fassett
Caroline Bradley ..... Kate Warriner
Joshua Winslow Jr. .... Frankie Thomas
Rosamond Payne ..... Charita Bauer
William Hollinger ..... Eddie Nugent
Muriel Payne ..... Ruth Lee
Molly ..... Juiann Caffrey
Keith Evans ..... Edwin Gordon
Horace Payne ..... Raymond Greenleaf

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *April 5, 1941*

Your Loving Son Opens Engagement at Little

Abby Merchant Comedy Acted by Amiable Group of Players

IT WAS a mild spring evening and the beginning of the silly season. And after the hard winter rigors it was pleasant to loiter over a cigaret during the intermissions outside at the Little Theater.

Indoors, the atmosphere was not exhilarating, although some of the vernal air crept in through the lobby doors. But there was a considerable lack of ventilation from the direction of the stage, where an overwrought, little comedy was deliberately trying to overcome as amiable a group of actors as you will find anywhere.

The comedy is Abby Merchant's Your Loving Son and it is not yet absolutely clear whether a trio or a quintet of producers are at the back of it, although the program admits only three. These gentlemen are Jay Richard Kennedy, Joseph F. Loewi and Alfred Bloomingdale and it is comforting to note that Bloomingdale's provided all the costumes and furnishings.

But, although these put your mind on spring sales, Your Loving Son tends to put your mind on all the dreariness of spring fever. Much of the rumpus is pretty silly. Abby Merchant has turned out a mechanical little farce about the adolescents who shame their foolish parents out of their assorted infidelities and if the notion isn't altogether humorless, Your Loving Son, is anyway.

But don't blame the players. Equity should be mighty proud of its Jessie Royce Landis, Jay Fassett, Eddie Nugent and Charita Bauer for their heroic perserverance in the face of rapidly-enveloping ennui and Frankie Thomas, now that he is in long pants, deserves citation for successfully fighting off a precocious part.

G. R.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *April 5, 1941*

"Your Loving Son" Staged At the Little Theatre

By JOHN MASON BROWN

JUST adolescence! An awful lot has been blamed on that, but never anything worse than the farce-comedy for which it was being held responsible at the Little last night. Twice at least Abby Merchant ended an act with this phrase fired straight at the audience as a supposedly humorous explanation for all the sour things which had been going on.

But it won't do. "Your Loving Son" requires far more explaining than this. Just adolescence, indeed! Even the youngster who was so silly as to reunite his father and mother when they were heading for divorce cannot be expected to shoulder

(Continued on page 340)

Reprinted from
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
April 5, 1941

Gloom

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

SOMETHING describing itself as "Your Loving Son" is momentarily striving to capture the laurels that have hitherto reclined gracefully on the embattled brow of the play called "Popsy." I won't say that the new comedy by Abby Merchant is any worse than "Popsy" that notable nadir of the drama season. It is, however, approximately as dull, inept and pointless, and it would be ungenerous of all of us who writhed, groaned or otherwise suffered through this pair of little daises if we did not insist that the old champion gracefully move over and share its throne with the newcomer. In any anthology of theatrical boredom there is room enough for both of them.

* * *

"Your Loving Son" is all about a young man who comes back from summer camp just in time to keep his mother and father from splitting up. It seems that the mother wants to go off with a young artist and the father is having some sort of affair with a married woman upstairs. There is quite a bit of plot, including an automobile accident, but, in addition to dullness, the play suffers from story complications, and I was never able to follow the narrative with the care it apparently required. Anyway, the son and his little girl friend talk cutely about adolescence and the other characters suffer from it in its ugliest form, and the resulting comedy is almost incredibly tedious.

* * *

As usual, the acting is better than the play deserves, which is an evasive remark. Young Frankie Thomas, who is a good and decidedly assured actor, and little Miss Charita Bauer, once of the cast of "The Women," who is a good actress, are not annoying as the children who foolishly bring their elders to what might laughingly be called their senses. It might be added that to play such parts and still not call out the homicidal instincts in spectators is not the least of the season's acting feats. Then the reliable Miss Jessie Royce Landis gives her usual competent performance as the nitwit mother, and Eddie Nugent and Jay Fassett and the rest of them behave manfully, and the whole thing is not conducive to the comfort of playgoers.

"It Happens on Ice"

(Editor's Note: Although "It Happens on Ice" is a revised edition of the 1940 production, CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS is reprinting the 3 reviews from two newspapers.)

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *April 5, 1941*

It Happens On Ice Has Second Edition

Glittering Performance Given by New Stars and Old Favorites

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

THE second edition of It Happens On Ice, one of the few spectacles that has ever succeeded in filling the stage of the Center Theater satisfactorily, came into being last night without the cheerful presence of the eminent Joe Cook, but with all of the speed and most of the color of the earlier production. It is a brilliant show.

There are, I presume, many people who could watch skating all night without getting either tired or dizzy, just as there are balletomanes who would enjoy a double-length Hamlet if it were danced to Tchaikowsky's music. For myself, despite an unbounded admiration for these clever artists who spin and pirrouette and leap with such amazing abandon, and despite their grace, which is second only to that of swans or sea gulls, I find that an hour or so of it is sufficient to fill the eye and mind. The rest is redundant, even though, as I admit, superb.

Numbers Retained

Several of the most beautiful numbers of the ice ballet have been left in the program. The Legend of the Lake, obviously patterned after the Swan Lake Ballet (although it has a happy ending in deference to the Center customers) offers Skippy Baxter, star of the male contingent, his greatest opportunity, and I think he is more magnificent than he was in the first edition. Wintertime, a kaleidoscopic picture that is as nostalgic as a Currier and Ives print—but much more lively—is repeated, and the beautiful black and white number called Your Presence Requested is seen again in all its splendor.

Something of a tactical error was made, I think, in the presentation of a number of songs by the non-skating members of the cast. The tiny and tinny voices of girl trios are not adapted to the cavernous reaches of the Center Theater. And on one occasion when the singers were placed so far upstage that they apparently couldn't hear the band, their voices were not only frosen but at least a quarter-tone flat.

Many of Old Favorites

Many of the old favorites are still with the company, among them the Four Bruises, reckless with their pratt falls, rowdy in their deportment, and screamingly funny throughout. La Verne, who is still coy about giving her first name to the public, continues to do her torrid dance numbers, and Hedi Stenuf, the skating star from Vienna, is remarkably graceful for one so muscular.

There are, however, two new stars in the icy firmament creat ed by Producers Sonja Henie and Arthur M. Wirtz. The first is a little blond drum majorette from California who took up skating after a tour with Fred Waring's band, and who now combines ice-adagio with baton twirling. Her name is Betty Atkinson, and she is tops in both of her acquired arts. The other is a comedian named Freddie Trenkler, who stopped the show with his expert clowning, and who greatly relieved the magnificent solemnity of some of the more spectacular ballets.

Dorothy and Hazel Caley, the Toronto girls, and little Mary Jane Yeo, the delightful ingenue are still to be seen, while Jo Ann Dean and Gene Berg have a charming number.

Gene Snyder's staging is expert and the Norman Bel Geddes' sets are expansive and manifestly expensive. Altogether a glittering performance.

It Happens on Ice

Second edition of a spectacle in two acts; staged by Gene Snyder; devised by Leon Leonidoff, costumes by Norman Bel Geddes and Willa Van; settings by Mr. Geddes; lyrics by Al Stillman and Mitchell Parish; songs by Vernon Duke, Fred Ahlert, Peter De Rose and Dorival Caymmi; presented by Sonja Henie and Arthur M. Wirtz at the Center Theater April 4.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *April 5, 1941*

"It Happens on Ice" Opens a New Edition

By WILELLA WALDORF

BROADWAY producers with moth-eaten revues on the boards used to indulge in a publicity debauch around this time of year and launch what they fondly termed "a spring edition." The reviewers, loyally attending the second "first night," generally discovered that the leading lady had one new costume and a joke not more than three months old had been written in for the comedian in Act II. Otherwise things were pretty much the same except that the cast, not unnaturally, appeared a bit tired of it all.

When the Center Theatre opened the second edition of its skating carnival, "It Happens on Ice," last night, therefore, this reviewer was in no very merry state of mind, especially as the first, or original, edition struck us as very, very icy indeed.

It is now our happier privilege to report that wonders have been achieved with "It Happens on Ice" since we dozed through the first half at the opening last winter. As a matter of fact, we understand they have been working over it for months now, and the new edition is merely a climax to their labors; but whatever or however it has happened, somebody with a revue sense has re-routined "It Happens on Ice" and made it into an enjoyable performance.

It's All on Skates

One very wise move is to keep it almost entirely on skates. Everybody but the singers skate, and no doubt they would, too, if they weren't so busy keeping in microphone range. (A sister trio moved out of range once and might just as well have been warbling in a silent picture.)

Joe Cook, an old favorite in this department, is no longer in evidence, but we are shedding no tears over his departure, for he was decidedly icebound in the first edition and must be enjoying himself a lot more right now on the vaudeville circuits. (Why doesn't somebody write a new musical comedy for Joe to appear in next winter?)

The comedy is now definitely in pantomine and on skates, and while the Four Bruises with their scrub-lady skit are still the funniest things in the show, they have competition from some excellent Zanies, including Freddie Trenkler, who calls himself the Bouncing Ball of the Ice; Fritz Dietl, who wears skates on stilts—if you can imagine such a thing—and several other knock-and-fall-about gentlemen not so easily identified in the program.

A Revue on Ice

The show in general has been shaken together and refurbished here and there so that it now seems less like Valentine's Day at the Radio City Music Hall and more like a Broadway revue on skates.

True, even brilliant skaters can do just so many things on ice, and after they've been at it for a couple of hours the novelty wears off. Nevertheless, the first half (a long half, by the way) is now generally pleasant, and if the rest of the evening seems a bit repetitious, it is worth waiting until the Four Bruises do their scrubwoman act, which is just before the finale.

Of the technique of skating we shall not speak (being unable to stand up on even a child's double runners) except to say that all of the principals, not to mention the chorus, are too expert for words and that the comedians make falling down seem the merriest exercise in the world.

Ruby Mercer, Jack Kilty and Richard Craig did what singing was required from time to time, but it's the skaters who provide the sensations of the performance.

What happens on ice at the Center this spring is a marked improvement on what happened last winter—a cheering thought with hot weather just around the corner.

'YOUR LOVING SON,'

NEW YORK POST

(Continued from page 339)

the full responsibility. Heaven knows, he was young enough. And trying enough, too. And so was the little girl from upstairs with whom he pretended at one point to be eloping.

But what about those scrambled adults who were much more adolescent than the young? Or the infantile complications in the plot which kept on bobbing up in the name of farce to turn a siesta into a nightmare? Or the childishness of the dialogue with its blind winks at sophistication?

The answer was an evening of sub-adolescent monkeyshines too old for the nursery, too young for the play school. It was tiresome beyond belief, need, or excuse. Everything was effortful, and all the efforts were in vain. In the presence of such dullness one can only suspect that, like the dullness of Sheridan's father, it must (in Dr. Johnson's phrase) have been the result of a good deal of pains.

All things considered, Jessie Royce Landis, Jay Fassett, Frankie Thomas and Charita Bauer are doubtless not to be blamed for having kicked the script around like the empty trunk it is. Unquestionably they did what they could. No less unquestionably whatever they did that was passable was better than "Your Loving Son" deserved.

"Watch on the Rhine"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *April 2, 1941*

Lillian Hellman's 'Watch on the Rhine' Acted With Paul Lukas in the Leading Part

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN "Watch on the Rhine," which was put on at the Martin Beck last evening, Lillian Hellman has brought the awful truth close to home. She has translated the death struggle between ideas in familiar terms we are bound to respect and understand. Curious how much better she has done it than anybody else by forgetting the headlines and by avoiding the obvious approaches to the great news subject of today. After the hardness and coldness of "The Children's Hour" and "The Little Foxes," it is also remarkable that she is now writing with great humanity about people whose native grace she admires.

Her two previous dramas were more perfectly put together, each scene dovetailing with the one preceding. The narrative of "Watch on the Rhine" drifts into generalities before the main action is well started. But that is carping at technicalities, and it does not destroy a general impression that "Watch on the Rhine" is the finest thing she has written. Beautifully directed by Herman Shumlin and magnificently acted by Paul Lukas in the leading part, it is a play of pith and moment and the theatre may be proud of it.

* * *

What it says is that the death of fascism is more desirable than the lives and well-being of the people who hate it. Miss Hellman makes that familiar point without political argument and without reproducing in miniature form the struggle between fascism and democracy. In a comfortable country house near Washington a wealthy American family is offering refuge to a penniless Rumanian count and his American wife. On the day when the play opens they are also expecting to receive home their daughter, who was married to a German twenty years ago. Sara Mueller she is now, and presently she arrives, shabby and happy, with her husband and three children. As it turns out, her husband is no ordinary refugee, but a worker against fascism, deep in the intrigues of embittered Europe.

Since the power of "Watch on the Rhine" depends in large part upon the turn of the plot, it would do the theatregoer a disservice to describe it too completely here. But it gives away nothing essential to say that the struggle comes when the Rumanian Count finds out Herr Mueller's secret identity and tries to blackmail him. "Watch on the Rhine" has many other qualities. The characters are well drawn out of affection for people of integrity. The writing is enormously skillful—humorous, witty and also forthright when the time comes for plain speaking. Among other things, Miss Hellman draws a vivid contrast between the simple good-will of a normal American family and the dark callousness of Europeans who have grown accustomed to horror, intrigue and desperation.

* * *

Under Mr. Shumlin's direction it is acted to the hilt. The enjoyment you take in these people and the sympathy you have for their ordeal depend largely upon the high quality of the acting. As the enemy of Fascism, Mr. Lukas's haggard, loving, resourceful determination becomes heroic by virtue of his sincerity and his superior abilities as an actor. George Coulouris gives a lucid and subtly repelling performance as an opportunist count with good manners and odious character. Mady Christian's Sara Mueller is full of womanly affection and a crusader's resignation to realities. As a garrulous mother, Lucile Watson is enormously witty, her conflicting emotions coming swiftly to the surface.

In his outbursts of anger, John Lodge is merely strident as a brother, and also alarmingly Bostonian for an old Washington family, but when he is under control he acts with decision. Helen Trenholme plays the part of the countess with charm and with a sharp flash of spirit in her critical scene. Little Eric Roberts is amusingly bumptious as a boy who is tingling with ideas and overflowing with language. Eda Heinemann is wryly entertaining as a temperamental companion of the house. Frank Wilson is playing a colored butler with his familiar bland humor.

As usual, Jo Mielziner has designed a drawing-room that looks inviting and makes the play feel at home. It is a well-rounded play, full of flavor and good people and the characters control its destinies. For Miss Hellman never preaches. She has given fascism a terrible appearance without introducing a uniform or a party salute. Being primarily interested in people, she has shown how deeply fascism penetrates into the hearts and minds of human beings. "Watch on the Rhine" is a compassionate drama of men, women and children.

'WATCH ON THE RHINE'

A play in three acts by Lillian Hellman; directed by Herman Shumlin; setting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Helene Pons; presented on April 1, 1941, at the Martin Beck by Mr. Shumlin. The cast:

Anise	Eda Heinemann
Fanny Farrelly	Lucile Watson
Joseph	Frank Wilson
David Farrelly	John Lodge
Marthe De Brancovis	Helen Trenholme
Teck De Brancovis	George Coulouris
Sara Mueller	Mady Christians
Joshua Mueller	Peter Fernandez
Bodo Mueller	Eric Roberts
Babette Mueller	Anne Blyth
Kurt Mueller	Paul Lukas

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *April 2, 1941*

Lillian Hellman's "Watch on the Rhine" Presented

By JOHN MASON BROWN

MISS HELLMAN'S "Watch on the Rhine" is in many respects an interesting play. If it is not as overpowering as one had hoped, it nonetheless comes as an addition to the season. It may be both awkward and talky in getting under way. It may be unduly reluctant at its end to call a halt to its poignant farewells. And most certainly it lacks throughout that tightness of construction which lent such driving power to all of "The Little Foxes" and much of "The Children's Hour." But quite aside from the excellence of its performances, "Watch on the Rhine" has its rewarding features.

Remote as it may often seem from its own action, a keen mind and a warm heart lie behind its writing. Its dialogue can crackle with wit or rise to eloquence. Several of its characters are admirably rounded. And its approach to the anguishes and cleavages of the modern world is a novel one.

Miss Hellman's scene is a charming, well-endowed, untouched country house near Washington. Her subject is the way in which this American household becomes engulfed in the struggle abroad when a German son-in-law comes with his wife and children for a visit. This German has for several heroic years been engaged in underground Anti-Nazi activities. At his American mother-in-law's home he runs into a Rumanian blackmailer, also a guest there, who threatens to inform the German embassy of the son-in-law's whereabouts and money-raising mission. The issues of the old world thereafter tragically invade the new. Before the evening is over these peaceful Americans are steeled to action, having had the magnolias brushed out of their lives.

Miss Hellman's is not an ordinary propaganda play. Its methods are not forensic. What it says against the Nazis, it says for the most part obliquely but tellingly. What it contrasts are two ways of life—ours with its unawakened innocence and Europe's with its tragic necessities. What it demonstrates are those sicknesses abroad in the world which, to be dealt with, demand action, swift and brutal.

An Excellent Production

Interesting as is most of "Watch on the Rhine," and moving as some of it becomes, one cannot help wishing that all of it were more effective than it is. This time Miss Hellman has been almost too careful in avoiding the over-contrivance with which she has been charged in the past. Once again the core of her play is a melodramatic plot—and a good, old one at that, at least in its essentials. But in "Watch on the Rhine," though she still cannot resist her "big scenes" and writes them well in "Pinerotic" terms, Miss Hellman appears to be strangely shy about approaching them. She begins by being so concerned with her characters that one almost forgets she has a story to tell. Her breakfast scene introductions are not felicitously managed. Her family is more populous than is comfortable. And her small talk is often little less than garrulous.

If a blue-pencil would aid her becalmed exposition and save her ultimate leave-takings from being as over-long as they are at present, her play (which even now has much strength) would be far stronger. Much as the text needs editing, it would be hard, however, to improve upon Mr. Shumlin's production. Mr. Shumlin is an extraordinary director; one of the most evocative and understanding in our theatre. And he has not only assembled a fine company at the Martin Beck but worked it into a commendable ensemble.

Lucile Watson, a brilliant player, has never in her distinguished career given a wittier, more truculent, or amusing performance than she does as the sprightly grandmother who rules over Miss Hellman's home near Washington. As the German who works in the underground movement against the Nazis, Paul Lukas contributes one of the season's outstanding characterizations. His acting is free of all the easy tricks. It is beautifully restrained, capable of high tension, and possessed of a shining, simple faith. Mady Christians as his American wife is no less moving. And Eric Roberts as her over-written but amusing brat of a child; John Lodge as her lawyer brother; George Coulouris as the villainous Rumanian count; and Helen Trenholme as the American girl who is unhappily married to him, are all of them players who add to the persuasion and power of a drama which, in spite of its frequent disappointments, comes as one of the fullest, most rewarding of the season's offerings.

"Watch on the Rhine"

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'Watch on the Rhine' At the Martin Beck

Lillian Hellman's New Play Concerns Conflict in U. S. Over Fascism; Paul Lukas' Acting Brilliant

By JOHN ANDERSON

AS THE author of both "The Children's Hour" and "The Little Foxes" Lillian Hellman belongs among the few serious dramatists of the country, and her infrequent plays are greeted with high hope and usual acclaim. Thus it was that Mr. Shumlin's production of her newest play, "Watch On the Rhine," brought to Martin Beck's Theatre last night one of the season's best audiences to see a play which is passionately anti-Fascist and often deeply moving, yet which falters badly in its craftsmanship and loses its most vivid and vigorous points in over-writing.

Its superb climax is weakened by one of the longest farewells since Bernhardt's, an anti-climax in which Miss Hellman seemed anxious to put down every known instance of human tyranny—to put down, in fact, anything except the curtain. Not even the extraordinary power of Paul Lukas' amazingly sustained performance could hold it before an audience that had shed all its tears, blown all its noses, and looked on to a protracted and fumbling conclusion.

In spite of this serious defect, however, and other distracting dawdling at the beginning, the play has, in its best moments, the sharpness of observation and felicity of characterization that stamp all of Miss Hellman's most effective work.

Like Mr. Rice in "Flight to the West," she brings Europe warningly to America, only here the scene is the countryside near Washington, in the huge, rich living room where we see the easy, graceful living of the Farrelly's. Madame Farrelly is a matriarchal tyrant—her son the apron-strung but susceptible image of her dead husband.

Their house guests are two "refugees," a Rumanian count and his unhappy wife, who is in love with the son.

'Papers' Discovered

Into this handsome security come Sara, the Farrelly daughter, and her German husband, who fled in 1933, and their three children. Herr Mueller describes himself as an "anti-Nazi agent." In the most melodramatic tradition the villainous count discovers the well known "papers" in Herr Mueller's portfolio and in the play's most powerful scene tries to blackmail the secret agent for $10,000. Herr Mueller uses the old reliable glass-of-sherry-dashed-in-the-face business to overcome the count, and then quietly but firmly kills him.

After such ancient but still effective hokum there is nothing to be done except wind up the plot and put the cat out. But Miss Hellman has Herr Mueller take a long farewell. The children are brought in, and he promises them, eloquently but extensively, the dawn of a new world. It sounds great; its description though politically vague, suggests a civilization in which one man will love another's children as he does his own, and reject all violence. For violence, says Miss Hellman, is a disease.

The point here is not the argument, but the fact that it is dramatically misplaced and detached. The whole conflict of ideas in the play is, in fact, curiously out of focus, as if Miss Hellman were dealing with the subject at arm's length. The drama lacks the full presence she wrought so brilliantly in her previous work; it lacks the dimensions and propulsion of her strongest plotting.

Faintly Artificial

This is, possibly, the fault of Miss Hellman's most ardently admiring critics. I have pointed out myself on other occasions that she is so adroit in the construction of her plays that they have seemed over-plotted and therefore faintly artificial, in spite of their obvious power. Here she has gone to the other extreme and somehow missed the tremendous force of dramatic statement by simplifying her narrative beyond the limits of structural security.

Her other qualities as a playwright are all in evidence—the tone of the dialogue and the humor, trenchantly written for Lucile Watson and winningly gentle for Herr Mueller's little son, Bodo, played disarmingly by Eric Roberts.

As concentrated in the secret agent her portrait of a man fighting for freedom in a sort of personal warfare against Fascism is both gallant and provocative, and Mr. Lukas gives it the steady illumination of a brilliant performance.

Miss Watson brings back from Hollywood all her well remembered graces of barbed wit and crisp inflection to play the part of Madame Farrelly. George Coulouris portrays the villain in sure strokes and vivid color, and there are excellent performances by Mady Christians, Helen Trenholme and John Lodge, who finds himself happily rescued after his Broadway debut in "Night of Love."

Mr. Mielziner's single setting is not only handsomely suitable, but adroit in its effort to solve a physical handicap which I suspect helps to dissipate the play's effectiveness and force Mr. Shumlin's usually fluent direction into difficult passages. The stage and the theatre are too large for a drama that needs not only concentration but intimacy.

If it is unfair for critics to hold some playwrights to higher standards than they do others, the practice carries its own compliment. After all, Miss Hellman set her standard herself, and "Watch On the Rhine" simply doesn't come up to it. It misses its mark on a great subject that deserves her best.

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Portrait of a German

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

NOT to go beating about any bushes, Miss Hellman's "Watch on the Rhine" is a moving and beautiful play, filled with eloquence and a heroic spirit. Splendidly acted by a fine cast and directed with all of Herman Shumlin's sympathetic meticulousness, this latest drama by the brilliant author of "The Little Foxes" and "The Children's Hour" is a work of dignity and power that pays a proper tribute to the gallant and undespairing underground fighters in Germany against Nazi tyranny. Transferring the horror and the valor of the secret war being waged by unknown German heroes against their country's rulers to an aristocratic home near Washington and divorcing the narrative from most of the cliches of the customary anti-Nazi play, Miss Hellman's drama, which has a minimum of violence and a maximum of honest emotion, is the first theatrical work of its type to be worthy of the men and women it is celebrating.

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This is essentially the story of Kurt Mueller, a former German engineer, who has fought the Nazis in Spain, in central Europe, in Scandinavia, and in his own country and has come to America for a short period of rest, bringing with him his loyal wife and his three gallant children who have shared his fears and his privations. But it also is the story of aristocratic old Fanny Farrelly, the splendid matriarch who ruled her country estate with urbanity and grace, lived in a comfortable past when democracy had itself been urbane and graceful and was sharply taught a lesson in the savagery and the immediacy of the fight to maintain democracy when the German underground fighter, who had married her daughter, came to her for temporary sanctuary. It is the tale, too, of the decadent, baffled, hopeless Rumanian, who believed in nothing and cared for nothing and was the symbol of the old Europe that had lost its faith and its future. It is because these characters are so true and so believable that their melodramatic meeting becomes not only effective but deeply moving.

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In truth, "Watch on the Rhine" is melodramatic only in so far as the events of the shattered world of today's newspapers are melodramatic. Miss Hellman, who knows that violence and highly colored emotions are merely the stuff of our existence in these days of totalitarian warfare, has never been afraid of such things when her story called for them, which is one reason why she represents the best and most typical in American playwriting. But, although her play has melodrama, it is essentially a quiet and orderly work, which rarely raises its voice, has scant time for political lectures and can be humorous and charming as well as dramatic and moving. It is not that her drama lacks faults. Although in the past Miss Hellman has been the most economical of our dramatists, there are times in "Watch on the Rhine" when she grows a trifle garrulous. I think, too, that the interesting character of the villainous Rumanian blackmailer, who is essentially as tragic a figure as he is a hateful one, might have been written more carefully. The important thing, though, is that the characterizations and the emotions of the play are so true and so exalted. That the hero of her drama should be truly a hero is a wry tribute to our age and our maligned humanity.

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The acting, as I have said, is brilliant. Paul Lukas plays the anti-Nazi fighter with wisdom, deep feeling and a splendid combination of force and gentleness. There used to be cries that our drama lacked heroes. This Kurt Mueller proves that any such charge no longer holds true. That fine actress, Miss Lucile Watson, offers one of her ablest characterizations as the stern and witty and, in the end, understanding matriarch. Here again is a role of true stature. There is excellent work, too, by Miss Mady Christians as the American wife of the German, by Miss Eda Heinemann as an independent companion of the matriarch, by Miss Helen Trenholme as the unhappy wife of the Rumanian, by John Lodge as the son of the grand old lady, and, in particular, by George Coulouris in the difficult role of the tortuous and tortured villain. In addition, there must be a special word for the youthful actors who play the stage's most attractive group of children. Peter Fernandez and pretty Miss Anne Blyth are splendid as the older children and Eric Roberts as the baby of the group, with his love for big words and sententious phrases, is nothing short of triumphant. "Watch on the Rhine" is a play that possesses a valiant soul.

"Watch on the Rhine"

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'Watch on the Rhine'— The Best Play of the Season

A Melodrama of Anti-Nazism

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE theater found its voice last night—that authoritative voice which, when it comes, makes up for all the waste and blundering and triviality that weaken and discredit the stage. It found its voice and gave us a play that shrivels anything else produced on Broadway this season.

Watch on the Rhine is the real anti-Nazi play of our times—the play we have wanted, the play we have needed. It is an anti-Nazi play which differs from all the others as completely as it transcends them. It is a play about human beings, not their ideological ghosts; a play dedicated to the deeds they are called upon to perform, not the words they are moved to utter. It is a play whose final crisis, though peculiar to one man's life, is yet central to our own. Not in Germany, but in a mellow country house near Washington, Miss Hellman has struck against Fascism with all the old force of *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes*, but with new warmth and new depth of feeling.

Visit in America

The central figure of *Watch on the Rhine* is Kurt Mueller, a German who, since Hitler's rise to power, has spent his life and risked his neck as an anti-Nazi. He and his American-born wife and their three amazing children have lived poorly and precariously in many places near the German border; he has slipped in and out of the Reich on dangerous missions time and again; he has fought with the Loyalists in Spain.

Now he and his family come to visit his wife's mother in America. Fanny Farrelly is a sharp-tongued dowager, born to the great world, who has not seen her daughter in 20 years. A high-handed representative of the old school, she understands little of the life the Muellers have led, and not too much of the world that has made them lead it; but she understands values. Nothing happens for a time: the whole leisurely, sunlit first act mostly conveys the charm of a family reunion, the warmth of human feeling, the interplay of one sharp personality on another.

But imperceptibly things have begun to move. Now they move fast. Visiting the Farrellys is Teck De Brancovis, an impoverished, degraded Rumanian count whose sleek European world has been cut from under him and left him desperate. De Brancovis loses no time getting the lowdown on Mueller and his activities, for he sniffs possibilities of blackmail.

What follows is exciting melodrama, as all Miss Hellman's plays—merely in terms of action—are exciting melodrama. But granting a few stagey moments, here—if ever in the theater—is melodrama with meaning. For when Mueller learns that he must go back to Germany to try to rescue three fellow-fighters, and Brancovis stands in his way, he knows he must kill him. He knows he must *act* to save what he is fighting for. He knows, as we have all come to know, that he must violate a humane code to restore a humane world: that by blows, and blows alone, can Fascism be destroyed. Mueller thus becomes, symbolically, something a great deal less remote and specific than an undercover anti-Nazi. He is the needed man of our times: the man of principle who is also a man of action. There lies the full justification of Miss Hellman's melodrama—there, and in the added fact that we, today, are up to our waists in a *world* of melodrama. And there, at the same time, lies the notable importance of her play.

Gains From Skill

But *Watch on the Rhine* does not end on a militant note. It ends on a deeply human and moving one—in a choking scene of farewell between Mueller and his wife and children.

The play gains vastly from Miss Hellman's sure skill as a playwright and Mr. Shumlin's as a director. The dialogue, running the whole way from wit to fervor, is admirable. So is the characterization. Salty, officious great ladies may always be surefire on the stage, but Miss Hellman's Fanny Farrelly is not just another of them—she is a woman as well. And Mueller, an infinitely harder character to draw, is a living man. The three oddly grown-up Mueller children, with their good manners and their understanding of what their father is fighting for, brighten the whole evening. Bodo, the youngest, is one of the sights of the season—and Eric Roberts, who plays him, one of the finds.

Lukas Magnificent

Mr. Shumlin, working in a play of many moods, has given it a brilliant production. What most stands out in that production is Paul Lukas's really magnificent acting. He is Kurt Mueller—and I am not given to throwing that kind of phrase around. He plays the part with terrific inner passion, and with not one ounce of acute theatricalism. Lucile Watson, with her admirable adroitness, plays the old dowager splendidly. Mady Christians brings both feeling and dignity to the part of the wife, and George Coulouris plays Brancovis with considerable force. Helen Trenholme is effective in a lesser role, and the rest of the cast fall into line.

Mr. Mielziner's set is not only very handsome, but exactly right.

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Watch on the Rhine Avoids the Soap-Box

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

THE Axis suffers another intellectual defeat in Lillian Hellman's new play, Watch on the Rhine, and the theatrical season is once more enriched by a sturdy and moving discussion of the conflict between totalitarian and democratic ideals.

Miss Hellman is not, this time, in a cynical or hopeless mood. True, she is writing with passionate conviction and she has created one—but only one—character who is as sinister as any of the figures to be found in The Little Foxes. The people of her drama are humane and compassionate and fired by lofty ideals, and the entire play is a hymn of praise for the courage and nobility of Fascism's opponents rather than an indictment of European political gangsterism.

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Watch on the Rhine, is, therefore, a play and not a soapbox. Miss Hellman makes little or no attempt to demonstrate the wickedness of Hitlerism, perhaps assuming that the public needs no further instruction. But she does rejoice that there is still, even in the hearts of some German people, an unconquerable determination to fight the beast to the death.

Her protagonist is a man who has devoted the past seven years of his life to working in the undercover movement against the Nazi regime. He, together with his American wife and three polyglot children, arrive at his wife's ancestral home near Washington, D. C., where it is his intention to leave the family while he returns to the Reich to continue his dangerous work. In this home he encounters a blackmailing Rumanian count who, upon learning of his identity and the knowledge that he is on the "wanted" list by the Gestapo, threatens to expose him to the German ambassador unless he buys freedom from surveillance with $10,000 out of the party funds he is carrying.

In the end, the anti-Nazi is forced—regretfully, for he is not a brutal man—to kill the Rumanian, leave his wife and children, and return to carry on his work.

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The play begins easily and charmingly, with touches of light humor, in the arrival of the Kurt Mueller family in the country house. Miss Hellman has lavished much kindly affection upon the three children, particularly the youngest, who is a combination of quaint German stiffness and punctilio and the irrepressible straightforwardness inherited from his mother. She has also sketched with illuminating clarity the character of Mueller's American mother-in-law, widow of a great American diplomat, a domineering, somewhat spoiled and selfish representative of the conservative old regime in our national life. The character of Mueller's wife, less fully developed, is marked principally by a boundless love of her husband and a whole-souled belief in his cause.

Miss Hellman pours all of her vitriol into the person of the blackmailer. It may be significant that he is not himself a Nazi nor a symbol of Nazism. He does represent, however, the fruits of Nazism—the army of knaves, scoundrels and cirminals who are attracted to the Nazi cause as an outlet for their brutal passions or who (like the Rumanian and Bulgar governments) are frightened by its evil force.

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Herman Shumlin, who directed Watch on the Rhine with his customary skill, also made a happy choice in his actors. Paul Lukas, last seen here with Ruth Gordon in a memorable production of A Doll's House, gave a solid sterling performance of Kurt Mueller. Lucile Watson, one of the theater's imperial ladies, was vivid, real and forceful as the American dowager whose shell of selfishness is cracked by pity and respect for Mueller's nobility of character. Mady Christians, always a magnetic actress, gave her best to a part that was filled with emotional moments, and George Coulouris turned himself into as nasty a Rumanian as you would ever hate to see.

The three children were especially good, with Eric Roberts and Peter Fernandez, veterans of Love's Old Sweet Song, and Anne Blythe, making her debut, combining to produce a shining performance.

John Lodge, Eda Heinemann and Helen Trenholme also contributed to the perfection of the production.

Watch on the Rhine shows us a new Lilian Hellman, and if you enjoy seeing justice and decency triumph—as who doesn't?—this is your play.